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ABSTRACT

A graduate teaching assistant who lived through the Northridge quake in Los Angeles County reached some realizations about her habits of thinking in the wake of that experience. As students schooled or even trained in poststructuralist critical theory and/or protocols of postmodern cultural critique, this teaching assistant and some of her Generation X colleagues realized that they have come to regard their roles as instructors with an unhealthy dose of irony, if not cynicism. As postmodern subjects, they are provoked to postulate themselves as a collection of disjointed subjectivities, a pastiche of motives and personalities, instruments of either hegemonic or destabilizing forces. But these instructors now find themselves asking from what source can they draw enough positive energy to perform their pedagogical tasks even "as if" there were any meaning or value in their work? The teaching assistant has on occasion been confronted with circumstances, seemingly real, and seemingly external enough to make her pause and think: maybe there is something at stake here, and maybe an individual can have some impact on the thing at stake. The experience of the earthquake showed her that the relative stability of instability is not the sum total of existence. So what if there is no "real" foundation?--there are at least contingent issues of importance. The conclusion is that thinking in terms of "sustainability" can help individuals acquire a better conception of the relationship between earth and human beings. Considered in the context of social theory, sustainability might support a movement toward "ethical collectivity." (TB)

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1995 4C's Presentation

Postmodern Pedagogy and Sustainability

This paper is collaborative in that it emerged out of a series of fruitful conversations with a number of my colleagues. I would like in particular to acknowledge my Northridge colleague Scott Covell and Dr. Robert Chianese also at The California State University Northridge.

Last year, close to the end of the fall term, a number of my colleagues and I began to discuss the plight of Generation X in the context of postmodern culture, and in the context of our role as Teaching Associates. We were beginning to reevaluate our reluctance to suggest any sense of shared meaning or value in the academic context, and we were beginning to grapple with some vague notions of "ethical collectivity" and "social sustainability."

Our common experience of the Northridge quake contributed to and heightened these initial thoughts and desires in a number of ways. As the inhabitants of Los Angeles County collectively experienced a genuine threat to their homes and indeed their lives, and then tried to regain some equilibrium and reestablish daily routines around sites of physical destruction and psychological trauma, I, for example, began to assert the following: it was surely not simulacra but corporeal beings that fled their shaking homes at 4:31 am on January 17, 1994; and it was collective human spirit and action which enabled us to get through both the initial shock and the subsequent stages of rebuilding.

Many of us found strength and support in our collegial relationships. We also found a sense of equilibrium in returning to school for our students; our roles as teachers, as leaders centered us. The postmodern condition seemed transformed. For example, it seemed very meaningful for me as a teacher to know how to instruct my class in the likely case of an aftershock, and to be sensitive to my students' very individual psychological traumas.

I thought, then, that many of us, schooled or even trained in poststructuralist critical theory and/or the protocols of postmodern cultural critique, have come to regard our roles as instructors with an unhealthy dose of irony if not cynicism. As postmodern subjects we are provoked to postulate ourselves as a collection of disjointed subjectivities, a pastiche of motives and personalities, instruments of either hegemonic or destabilizing forces, and so on. But from what source (placed in these postmodern predicaments), can we draw enough positive and concrete energy to perform our pedagogical tasks even "as

if" there was any meaning or value in our work? (This is a genuine question.)

Certainly, I'm no rationalist positivist, nor can I buy into the meta-narratives of humanist education that I have been so thoroughly trained to critique; but I have on occasion been confronted by circumstances, seemingly real, and seemingly external enough to make me pause and think: maybe there is something at stake here, and maybe I can have some impact on the thing at stake.

In Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition, an important, provocative, and widely read recent contribution to our field, Lester Faigley cites Jean Baudrillard's critique that, "that people least able to understand America are its intellectuals, who are 'shut away' on their campuses, dramatically but off from the fabulous concrete mythology developing all around them" (Baudrillard in Faigley, 206). I take exception with this characterization of academics for a number of reasons. In spite of their intellectual pursuits, all the academics I know are thoroughly engaged in the most banal elements of Baudrillard's "concrete mythology." Our intellectual work defends none of us from the very same quotidian problems that every other middle class American faces. Most contemporary scholars, after all, are not born but made through hard work, material and spiritual sacrifice. And even when an academic has gained tenure at age 35 or 40, (or in many cases 45 or 50, especially for women), they do not, then, take their place among America's culture and economic elite. Nor does the life of the Academy protect us from the various other ills of late-twentieth-century being. Just as our lives are affected by material circumstances, so too are

we affected by socio-psychological ills. Are academics immune from exhaustion, depression, or substance abuse? Are we or our children immune to random violence?

And then there is the environment--the one thing we all have in common, even with strangers--the weather and natural disasters. Concrete and local issues. Part of the shock of my experience of the Northridge Quake was perceiving the breadth of the vibrations: when the earth shook everything shook in unison. It was a strange and shocking perception of a much bigger whole than I was accustomed to in L.A.. The usual barricades--the locked doors of cars and homes--did not signify.

My experience of the earthquake asserted at least two things. 1) The literal and metaphorical foundations upon which we construct our society are not, in fact, stable--the boxes we construct for our protection can ultimately be undermined. We are only on relatively solid ground (the earth undulated in some of those early aftershocks). 2) On the other hand, this relative stability of instability is not the sum total of our existence. So what if there is no "real" foundation?--there are contingent issues of importance. The Earthquake school might say "when the foundation shakes, get the hell out of unstable structures" but "when the academy deconstructs itself pitch a tent." Just because this literal and metaphorical architecture of our society, of our culture, or our academy is not permanent, it does not mean that there is no continuity--that some things (like the will to survive), do not abide.

The earth shifts to reestablish equilibrium--but from our point of view it is a random disaster. We do not understand the earth's motives or grammar. We cannot emphasize--we cannot connect. Or can we?

Sustainability has been described as "the characteristics of any system that enable it to continue indefinitely without using up energy and resources or degrading the environment" (Chianese). Thinking in terms of sustainability focuses on creative solutions of the planet and its inhabitants. The issues of sustainability is pertinent to the present discussion not only because it can help us acquire a better conception of our relationship to the earth, but also because it can provide an interesting and significant interdisciplinary nexus for critical thinking and writing in the Freshman Composition classroom, and an antidote to the nihilism that seems to sap the intellectual energy of Generation X. And sustainability considered in the context of social theory might support a movement toward "ethical collectivity."

In Fragments of Rationality, Faigley represents the postmodern subject's ethical moment as "pausing to reflect on the limits of our understanding...respect for diversity and unassimilated otherness....finding the spaces to listen"? (Faigley, 239). This articulation of epistemological relativism, respect for diversity, and the importance of listening to one another sets a fine set of goals for the academy and the world outside of the academy, but I would like to supplement this vision with a plea for sustainability--the need to care for our local physical and social environments, and build with a respect for these environments.

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